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DIRECTORATE OF
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SYRIA: Greater Militancy in Responding to
Israeli Strikes

Israel's new policy of pre-emptive strikes against fedayeen bases in neighboring countries has rekindled a spirit of militancy in Syria. Israeli air strikes into Syria and air and armored strikes into Lebanon since the incident at the Munich Olympics in September have drawn immediate and, although still limited, more forceful Syrian responses, as evidenced by Syrian losses in tanks and planes. Damascus has called for support from the other Arabs, but it appears that the Syrians must still rely primarily on their own military resources, which have been augmented with new defensive hardware since last summer by both sea and air deliveries from the USSR.

Syrian Reaction

Syria's military reaction to the recent Israeli attacks against the fedayeen and Syrian military installations included the use of aircraft, heavy artillery, and tank bombardment. No ground skirmishes were reported. Serious damage both in the air and on the ground appears to have done little to dampen the Syrian determination. On 21 November, in the most serious fighting in more than two years, Syria lost six fighter aircraft and 12 to 15 tanks, as well as having at least one important radar complex knocked out.

The recent fighting reportedly also has buoyed the morale of the Syrian Army. Syrian officials, are determined to meet future Israeli incursions into Syria with force, even if it takes a "new war of attrition" with Israel. The Syrians apparently feel that their response to Israel has demonstrated that Syria is the only Arab state willing to stand up to the Israeli military machine.

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Israel has in the past believed that Syrian President Asad controlled fedayeen activity in his country. Since the Munich affair and the new Israeli policy of pre-emptive attacks on the fedayeen, Tel Aviv has tried to persuade Syria to follow the examples of Jordan and Lebanon by further restricting fedayeen activity in and from Syria. Recent Israeli attacks against the fedayeen and Syrian Army outposts were intended to signal loud and clear that further fedayeen attacks from Syria could spell only grief for the Syrians.

Effects on other Arabs

Syria has chastised some of its brother Arab states for failing to join in its current struggle with Israel and has called for an end to the cease-fire on all fronts. Syria has made no move, however, to take the issue to the UN Security Council. One top Syrian official at the UN has declared that his government's policy is to defend itself and that it would in no way involve the UN. The Syrian rhetoric and riposte, at the same time, will be used to demonstrate Damascus' Arab credentials.

This show of militancy, however, is not shared by Damascus' Arab colleagues; certainly Jordan will have no part of it, and any offers by Egypt and others of token air and possibly ground forces would do little to alter the power balance. [REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Barring some major Israeli incursion into Syria, Egypt will resort to little more than political and rhetorical support.

The Syrian front has been generally quiet for two weeks, except for a brief Syrian artillery barrage on 25 November, which drew no Israeli response. Further localized fighting may be expected, however, if the fedayeen stay active.

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Some observers claim that the domestic situation in Syria has required Syrian leaders to take a tougher line vis-a-vis Israel. Indeed, there have been persistent rumors of pending changes in the Syrian cabinet, of increased dissatisfaction within the military, and even of possible coup attempts against the regime of President Asad. The frequency of change in Syrian governments in the past assures continued speculation about unrest, but there is no firm evidence that the current policy has been fostered by domestic instability. At the same time, Asad knows that a charge of being "soft" on Israel will be used against him by potential opponents, particularly those in the military. A more plausible explanation, perhaps, is that Syria aspires to play a more important role in the Arab community and, like Egypt and Libya, to place itself in the forefront of the Arab struggle with Israel. Syria's new aura of toughness also has been served by Moscow's recent demonstration of close support for Damascus.

On the whole, Israel's more aggressive policy vis-a-vis the fedayeen and Syria's determination to respond militarily do increase the possibility of further serious armed clashes. However, Israel's decision not to respond militarily to Syria's most recent artillery barrage in the Golan Heights area and Syria's marked vulnerability to any major Israeli military effort suggest that while limited engagements will continue to occur intermittently, they will not necessarily be followed by a major outbreak of fighting. Both Israel and Syria will continue to try to minimize their military losses. Although Damascus may now have put a temporary hold on the fedayeen, Syria probably will continue to allow them some freedom of action against Israel. If Syrian military and political leaders come to feel the situation has become too dangerous for them, they can point to the absence of significant, tangible support from the other Arab states and to the cautious policies of the USSR as justification for drawing back.

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